IGNATIUS' "DOCETISTS"

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Of the problems raised by Ignatius' letters, the most intransigent have been three.[1] Were all the Asian churches to whom he wrote under pressure to "Judaize", or only Magnesia and Philadelphia? Were all these churches threatened by a "docetic" teaching, or only some, perhaps different from those with Judaizers?[2] What precisely did the "docetism" consist of? I offer some reflections on the first two of these questions, and a new form (so far as I know) of a solution to the third: "docetism" is a modern misunderstanding for a form of Ebionism.[3]

Jewish Christians

Ignatius had visited the church at Philadelphia, and his experience there was of resistance by aggressive Jewish Christians. In the well-known passage (Φ 6-9) we learn that people there "propounded Judaism", including some of Gentile birth ("uncircumcised"); they refused to regard the Gospel as scripture (γέγραπται),[4] and gave authority only to the ἀρχεῖα, that is the

[1] For a review see Charles Munier, "Où en est la question d'Ignace d'Antioche? Bilan d'un siècle de recherches 1870-1988", *ANRW II.27.1* (Berlin/New York, de Gruyter 1993), 359-484, esp. 404-413; Christine Trevett, *A Study of Ignatius of Antioch in Syria and Asia* (SBEC 29: Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter, Mellen 1992), esp. 152-199.

[2] For a recent attempt to resolve these two questions see Jerry L. Sumney, "Those who 'Ignorantly deny him': The Opponents of Ignatius of Antioch", *JECS* 1/4 (1993), 345-365. Sumney's strictness of method results in an inevitable conclusion: of three letters only Smyrnaeans has a docetic opposition, and the Jewish Christians behind Philadelphians and Magnesians cannot be shown to be Judaizing. Historians have to weigh less limited evidence.

[3] A previous suggestion that the docetists were Ebionites was made by John Pearson in *Vindiciae Epistolarum S. Ignati* (Cambridge 1672), but this has not been widely taken up.

[4] Ignatius wrote: "For I heard certain people saying, Ἐὰν μὴ ἐν τοῖς ἀρχείοις εὕρω, ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ οὐ πιστεύω; and when I said to them, Γέγραπται, they replied, That is the question". I have followed the interpretation of W. Bauer, *Die Apostolischen Väter*

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Old Testament. They seem to have appealed also to the Jewish priesthood as authoritative: "The priests likewise were good, but better is the High Priest . . ." (9.1).

Jewish Christians were also in evidence in Magnesia (M 8-10), as Bishop Damas and his colleagues must have reported. They encouraged church members to "live after Judaism", observing sabbaths and other "ancient practices", and called themselves by another name beyond (πλέον) Christians (Israel? The Poor People [אביונים/πτωχοί, cf. Gal. 2.10]?).[5] Ignatius compares them to rotten leaven which has gone stale and sour, and insists that Christianity has superseded Judaism, which "believed in it". M 8 mentions two further elements in the Jewish Christian approach: they advocated strange doctrines, including antiquated and unprofitable fables; one of which Ignatius counters by saying that "there is one God who manifested himself through Jesus Christ His Son, who is his Word that proceeded from silence". We seem to have an echo here of the Jewish fables of Tit. 1.14, which the Pastor declared ἀνωφελεῖς in Tit. 3.9, and speculations of a proto-gnostical kind.[6]

It is sometimes thought that Jewish Christianity was limited to these two churches, but there are indications of the same problem elsewhere. In E 6.2 Onesimus is said to praise his church because there dwells no αἵρεσις in it; οὐδὲ ἀκούετέ τινος πλέον ἢ περὶ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ λαλοῦντος ἐν ἀληθείᾳ.

(HNT 18: Tübingen, Mohr 1920); H. Paulsen, in the revised edition (1985), prefers the translation, ". . . I do not believe the gospel", following Mk. 1.15. W.R. Schoedel, "Ignatius and the Archives", *HTR* 71 (1978), 97-106, *Ignatius of Antioch* (Hermeneia: Philadelphia, Fortress 1985), 207-9, translates: "If I do not find (it) in the archives, I do not believe (it to be) in the gospel". "The gospel" would thus not be a written text but the Christian message, as in Paul. Schoedel is surely right to understand "it" in both clauses, and to see the archives as the OT, but his addition of "to be" is implausible. The balance of the clauses suggests the same suppressed object in both, and a written εὐαγγέλιον to balance the written ἀρχεῖα; it is quite likely that Ignatius quotes written Gospels a number of times, including Jn. 3.8 at Φ 7.1; and he goes on in Φ 9 to contrast "the beloved prophets in their preaching" with "the Gospel" as "the completion of immortality". The parallel again suggests a second written authority: cf. S 5.1, "the prophets . . . the law of Moses . . . the Gospel".

[5] Schoedel, 126, suggests "Judaism": in Rev. 2-3 we hear of those who "say that they are Jews but are not" (2.9, Smyrna; 3.9 Philadelphia).

[6] Schoedel notes the link with the Pastorals, and discusses the difficult closing sentence, *Ignatius*, 118-122. See also L.W. Barnard, "The Background of St. Ignatius of Antioch", *VC* 17 (1963), 193-206. Paulsen, 52, gives references for understanding silence as equivalent to God in non-Gnostic ancient religious texts, as well as in Nag Hammadi documents.

Not only does this recall the comment in Φ 6.1, "If anyone propound Judaism to you, μὴ ἀκούετε αὐτοῦ." More significantly it recalls M 10.1, "If anyone calls himself by another name πλέον τούτου [Christian]". The context in M 8-10 shows that some *Jewish* name beyond "Christian" was in view. The same is likely in E 6. The people who would be speaking "more than about Jesus Christ" are likely to be those propounding Judaism with its sabbath rules and other ancient practices, stale leaven, useless myths and so on. So we have a hint that there were Jewish Christians in Ephesus, as there had been "Nicolaitans" a few years earlier (Rev. 2.6), even if Onesimus was not worried by them.

In T 4f Ignatius is being transparently untruthful. He has many deep meditations about God, and could write to the Trallians about heavenly matters, but it would not be good for them. He could reveal his knowledge of arrays of angels and musterings of principalities, ὁρατά τε καὶ ἀόρατα, but they are babes and might take harm. All this leads on into the warning against heresy in T 6, and implies that the "heretics" have been bragging about their visions of the angels and principalities in heaven. Now not only are angels and archons the stuff of all Jewish visions, and of the Jewish mystical literature over a millennium from 1 Enoch to the Hekhalot writings; we also find Paul writing of Christ as the co-creator of the angelic powers, ὁρατά τε καὶ ἀόρατα, in Col. 1.15-17, alongside warnings against those who judge others about new moons and sabbaths, food and drink, on the basis of their visions (2.16-18). So it must seem probable that there were Jewish Christians active at Tralles too. Furthermore any talk of angels and archons may make us think of the useless myths in M 8.[7]

In S 5 Ignatius speaks of certain persons who ignorantly deny Jesus Christ, and "have not been persuaded by the prophecies nor by the law of Moses, nay nor even to this very hour by the Gospel".[8] This follows a

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[7] Both Schoedel and Paulsen take Ignatius at his word; Paulsen suggests that visions were by now a *Christian* as well as a Jewish practice, with a common lore. But the practice is a *Jewish* Christian one in the NT: there the constant theme of the Johannine literature and the Pastorals is that no man has seen God at any time—cf. M.D. Goulder, "Vision and Knowledge", *JSOT* 56 (1994), 53-71.

[8] It is often thought that Papias supports the idea of an oral Gospel in view of his comment, "I supposed that things from books were not so helpful as those from the living and abiding voice" [of Aristion, the elder John and such] (apud Euseb. *H.E.*, III.39.4); but the argument is frail. Papias knew Mark and Matthew (*ibid.*, 15), he has several phrases echoing the Lucan preface, and he has the apostles Andrew, Peter, Philip, Thomas as in John, in the Johannine order. There were plenty of spurious works

long assertion of the reality of Jesus Christ's birth, baptism, passion and resurrection in S 2-4, and the "certain persons" are those who say he seemed to have suffered in S 2. The saint expects them to have been persuaded by listening to the Old Testament, presumably familiar to them from hearing it in church, or perhaps in a synagogue. In either case it is striking that the law of Moses should be invoked. But especially significant is the reference to the Gospel, which reminds us of Φ 8. The Gospels are all quite clear that Jesus really suffered and rose again, and Ignatius presses the details from Lk. 24 in S 3;[9] it must seem that the trouble-makers at Smyrna did not regard the Gospels as scripture any more than the Judaizers at Philadelphia.

The argument is not cogent for S, but it is strengthened by comments in Polycarp's Letter, of the same time; no doubt the passage reflects the situation in Smyrna. Citing Eph. 2.8, Polycarp says of the passion of Jesus Christ, "by grace are you saved, not from works. . . . So leaving the empty talk (τὴν κενὴν ματαιολογίαν) and the deceit (πλάνην) of many . . ." (1.3-2.1). Polycarp sees the situation of his day as the continuation of Paul's fight against a Jewish Christian doctrine of salvation by works, wrapped up in the κενὴν ματαιολογίαν of the circumcision party with their Jewish myths in the Pastorals (1 Tim. 1.6; Tit. 1.10). He too seems to give hints of the threat of Jewish Christianity at Smyrna.

With Ignatius few things are clear, and for Ephesus, Tralles and Smyrna all we have to go on is inferences. But the suggestions are there in the texts for all three churches; and the argument is cumulative in that the presence of a Jewish Christian pressure-group at Philadelphia, Magnesia and Tralles makes it more likely that the same movement was even more widespread in Asia. The saint had disputed with such a group at Philadelphia, and must have been told about one at Magnesia, both pressing for Jewish praxis in the church. But he was much more disturbed by their denial of the Lord's passion and other matters, and it is understandable that these absorb his attention in E, T and S.

One further recurring element in the Ignatians suggests the same conclusion. Each letter contains warnings against church gatherings apart from the bishop, "without the sanctuary", celebrating a eucharist that is not

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circulating by the thirteenth decade, and Papias sensibly wanted to check. He never refers to the oral tradition as the Gospel.

[9] F. Neirynck, "Luc. 24, 36-43: Un récit lucanien", in *Evangelica II* (BETL 99: Leuven, Peeters/Leuven University Press 1991), 205-226 (219-223).

valid (E 5, M 4, 7, T 7, Φ 3-4, S 6-8); and yet such Christians are present when Ignatius visits Philadelphia, and they are clearly still regarded as part of the Church in all the letters. It looks therefore as if there were united meetings for teaching, discussion and general edification, but separate gatherings where eating took place. This takes our minds back to Gal. 2.11-14, where Peter had been eating with the Gentile Christians, but when "certain from James" arrived, he separated himself. Often in Diaspora churches the host may have been a Gentile, and no notice taken of purity rules, with the meat perhaps just bought in the market. Good Jewish Christians might well then "separate themselves" as Peter did: the good bishop of Antioch would be all too conscious of the early history of his own church.

Magnesia and Philadelphia

The evidence of a "docetist" threat is all too evident in E, T and S, but has been disputed for M and Φ, letters to the two churches where the Jewish Christian problem is most obvious.[10] However the case for "docetism" at Magnesia is strong.

M 9 attacks those who observe sabbaths (and other ancient practices) rather than living by the Lord's day, "on which our life also arose through Him and through His death, which some deny". After further reproaches to Judaizers in 10 there follows a warning in M 11, "not because I have learned that any of you are so minded; but as being less than any of you, I would have you to be on your guard betimes, that ye fall not into the snares of vain doctrine; but be ye fully persuaded concerning the birth and

[10] Opinion remains divided whether there was (in Ignatius' mind as well as in fact) a single Judaizing-docetic opposition in Asia, or two distinct groups, or even more. The single view was held by T. Zahn, *Ignatii et Polycarpi epistulae martyria fragmenta* (Leipzig, Hinrichs 1876) and J.B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers II. S. Ignatius, S. Polycarp* (²London, Macmillan 1889), and more recently by W. Bauer (HNT 1920) and C.K. Barrett, "Jews and Judaizers in the Epistles of Ignatius", in R. Hamerton-Kelly *et al.* edd. *Jews, Greeks and Christians* (Fs.W.D. Davies: Leiden, Brill 1976), 220-244. Most modern critics think of two groups: Munier, 404-413; Schoedel (118, "the link between Judaizing and docetism, [at Magnesia] was invented by Ignatius"); P.J. Donahue, "Jewish Christianity in the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch", *VC* 32 (1978), 81-93; P. Meinhold, *Studien zu Ignatius von Antiochien* (Veröffentlichung des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte 97; Wiesbaden 1979). Paulsen, 64f., sits on the fence. C. Trevett, "Prophecy and Anti-Episcopal Activity: a Third Error combatted by Ignatius", *JEH* 34 (1983), 1-13, thinks of a charismatic movement, separate from the Judaists and the docetists, protesting against episcopalianism.

the passion and the resurrection which took place in the governorship of Pontius Pilate; for these things were truly (ἀληθῶς) and certainly done by Jesus Christ. . . ."

It is doubtful whether we should trust the saint's protestation that he has not heard of any lapse in the church from Pauline orthodoxy. He often gives the impression of flattery and insincerity, praising the churches for their unity behind their bishop in one chapter and deploring their dissident eucharists in another; maintaining that he was innocent of the divisions at Philadelphia (Φ 7), where he knew full well which way the πνεῦμα was blowing. The false modesty of "as being less than any of you" here does not commend his veracity. But this is hardly important. What is clear is that Ignatius thinks the doctrinal error is part of the Judaism. His comment on sabbath observance leads straight into "His death, which some deny"; and the anti-"docetist" warning follows on in M 11 from the anti-Judaist passage in 8-10.

We may note two further points. In the opening chapter Ignatius says he prays that there may be in the churches ἕνωσιν σαρκὸς καὶ πνεύματος Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (M 1), and the letter ends similarly with a prayer ἵνα ἕνωσις ᾖ σαρκικὴ τε καὶ πνευματικὴ (M 13). It is common for good pastors to pray for spiritual unity in their troublesome flocks; but fleshly union might be a more dangerous concept. It would be easy to understand the saint's language if, as so often, he had in mind the fleshly and spiritual union *of Jesus Christ*, as in M 1. Secondly, we have still to discuss the unprofitable myths of M 8, and the one God whose Son was the Word proceeding from silence. This is not just a matter of Jewish praxis, but is suggestive of some interesting heterodoxy.

There is no ἀληθῶς confession in Φ, but we have no reason to expect one. Φ is the shortest of the Asian letters, and is almost entirely given to exhortations to unity behind the bishop (1-5), in the light of the dispute Ignatius had held in the church (6-9), with some practical details (10-11). All the same we do not lack hints that the "docetist" trouble is in the back of Ignatius' mind. In the Prologue he congratulates the church for being firmly established and "rejoicing in the passion of our Lord and in his resurrection without wavering": ἀδιακρίτως implies some pressure to waver over these key doctrines. Φ 3 warns against noxious herbs, commenting "If any man walketh in strange doctrine, he hath no fellowship with the passion"; one would certainly have no fellowship τῷ πάθει if one were among the "some" who deny it.

Φ 6.1 contains the puzzling statement, "It is better to hear Christianity

from a man with circumcision than Judaism from a man uncircumcised". The second phrase is most easily understood if the Philadelphian church contained enthusiasts for a Judaizing form of Christianity (sabbath, purity laws, etc.), but who drew the line at circumcision. The text continues, "But if both do not speak about Jesus Christ, I look on them as tombstones. . . ." Since Φ 7f. make it clear that the Judaizers were members of the church, one wonders how any Christian, never mind how keen on *kashrut*, could fail to speak *about Jesus Christ*; and the answer suggested is that there is something doctrinally important in the letters' often repeated formula Jesus-Christ, which was not in line with the Judaizers' christology—in other words their "docetism".[11] There is a similar puzzle at T 9.1, "Be ye deaf therefore, when any man speaketh to you *apart from* (χωρίς) *Jesus Christ*": there is no complaint about Jewish praxis at Tralles, but the "docetists" there somehow speak apart from Jesus Christ.

Again, Φ 9 describes a climax: the Jewish priests were good, the patriarchs too and the prophets, "But the Gospel hath a singular preeminence in the advent (παρουσία) of the Saviour, his passion, the resurrection". The incarnation, passion and resurrection are so central to the Pauline gospel that we easily accept them as a natural shorthand for the Christian message in Ignatius too: but it is these three elements which we found in M 11, and which feature so strongly (and exclusively) in E, T and S. When they are so often stressed there as having happened ἀληθῶς, we must suspect the same "docetist" pressures behind Φ also.

Docetism

Eusebius preserves a letter of Serapion, about 200, in which the bishop speaks of claims for the *Gospel of Peter*, and describes its supporters as δοκηταί (*H.E.*, 6.12.6). The fragments which we have of *GP* justify the word "docetist" in only a very loose sense, and the term has been used since early times in an undefined and unhelpful way, often as little more than a term of abuse. Ignatius says "certain unbelievers (ἄπιστοι, faithless Christians) say that he suffered in semblance, τὸ δοκεῖν αὐτὸν πεπονθέναι" (S 2, almost the

[11] Schoedel, 202, interprets, "Anyone—whether Jew or gentile—who does not speak of Christ (and in Ignatius' mind that is bound to be true of anyone devoted to 'Judaism') is outside the church". This seems forced: and Ignatius does not treat the Judaizers as outside the church in Φ 7-9. Paulsen, 84, interprets similarly, comparing M 4, which does not appear to support the point.

same wording in T 10), so it has been natural for them to be labelled "docetists"; and an undefined label for a group whose creed is hard to define at least saves the trouble of thinking.

Since the thesis of P. Weigandt in 1961,[12] the attempt has been made to define and restrict the term. Weigandt allowed its applicability to four early heretical groups, those led by Satornilus, Cerdon and Marcion, and the community which produced the *Acts of John*. We know of Satornilus and Cerdon primarily from brief reports in Irenaeus. For Marcion we have some detailed allegations in Tertullian, and for the fourth group we have the greater part of their text.

Irenaeus brackets Satornilus with Basilides as followers of Menander (*A.H.*, 1.24.1f.). He came from Antioch, and attributed creation to seven angels, not to the unknown Father: the Saviour was unborn, without a body, without form, but seemed to be a man in appearance ("putative autem visum hominem"/δοκήσει δὲ ἐπιπεφηνέναι ἄνθρωπον). The Jewish God was in fact one of the angels, and Christ came to destroy him, saving those who were predestined to salvation, having received the spark of life from the creating angels.

Cerdon is treated with brevity in *A.H.* 27.1. He was also a follower of Menander, and taught in Rome in the mid-second century where he was the teacher of Marcion. He also distinguished the God of the law, a righteous God, from the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is benevolent but unknown. For his christology we have to go to Ps-Tertullian (*Her.* 6.1), who tells us that Christ was not born but appeared not "in substantia carnis" but "in phantasmate".

Irenaeus' account of Marcion is sketchy also: Jesus Christ appeared suddenly from heaven in the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar in the form of a man (*A.H.*, 1.27.2). For more detail we have to depend on Tertullian, who says Marcion's Christ was "per imaginem substantiae humanae" (*Marc.*, 3.10.2), and with only "phantasma carnis" (4.42.7). He experienced no passion, death, burial or resurrection (*de Carne*, 5.2f., 9); nor is there any physical resurrection of Christians (*Marc.*, 3.8.6f.; 5.7.4; Irenaeus, *A.H.*, 1.27.3). Christ came as a spirit to save the human spirit, not the body.

The *Acts of John* stems probably from the third century,[13] and in chs.

[12] "Der Doketismus im Urchristentum und in der theologischen Entwicklung des zweiten Jahrhunderts", Diss. theol., Heidelberg 1961. I have not been able to gain access to the work, and have had to rely on Udo Schnelle, *Antidoketische Christologie im Johannesevangelium* (FRLANT 144: Göttingen, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht 1987), 76-83.

[13] K. Schäferdiek, "The Acts of John", in Hennecke-Schneemelcher, *New Testament*

88-103 reveals a heterodox christology with associations with the Johannine literature: God is spoken of as "the Father" and there are frequent references to the Logos. The human Jesus has a spiritual double: when John touches him, sometimes he encounters solid flesh, and sometimes "his substance was immaterial and incorporeal, as if he did not exist at all" (92f.). The human Jesus suffered on the cross, but the divine Lord was away revealing to John the true cross of light, which alone has significance (97-102).

It is evident that none of the three second-century teachers is in line with the Ignatian opposition. The latter are Judaizers, where the former are anti-semitic. So far from any encouragement to observe sabbath or other ancient practices, any reverence for the ἀρχεῖα or visions of arrays of angels, they all distinguish carefully between the unknown Father (of our Lord Jesus Christ) and the Jewish God. According to Satornilus the Jewish God was merely one of the angels, and Christ came to destroy him; Marcion is even more radical, abolishing the entire Old Testament, and devaluing the physical universe. It may well be, however, that little survived on Satornilus' true teachings, and it is clear that none survived of Cerdon's: both have probably been assimilated to the more familiar position of Marcion. Nor is it at all likely that *AJ* reflects a christology held in the twelfth decade in Asia—or indeed earlier, since the Ignatian opposition is plainly widespread and well rooted. *AJ* is a later text, and offers a perverted version of the Johannine doctrine: the Logos, so carefully defined as having *become flesh* in the Johannines, has drifted apart from the human Jesus, and we are in the unreal world of modalist speculation.

In view of this impasse, I should like to propose a revised form of a 17th century hypothesis, and to argue that Ignatius' opponents were *Ebionites*. The important observation here is Ignatius' reluctance to use the single terms *Jesus* and *Christ*, each of which comes only five times in his letters. By contrast he uses the virtually hyphenated forms *Jesus Christ* and *Christ Jesus* about 130 times, the former far more often than the latter.[14] Thus he never attributes to his opponents the view that Jesus seemed to suffer;

Apocrypha II (ET London, SCM 1965), 192, "the Acts of John first come into view in the fourth century"; but docetist traditions similar to *AJ* are referred to in Clement of Alexandria (189). Clement writes, "It is reported in the traditions that John, when he touched [Jesus'] outward body, put his hand deeply in; and that the solidity of the flesh did not resist him, but made room for the hand of the disciple" (*Adumbrationes*, ad 1 Jn. 1.1; Stahlin III, *GCS* 17, p. 210, 12-15).

[14] There is a similar preponderance of the two names together, hyphenated so to speak, in the Johannine Epistles.

it is always αὐτόν, or Jesus Christ. This then leaves open the possibility that the opposition were "Ebionites", i.e. Jewish Christians with a deviant christology. They might have said, "Of course Jesus suffered on the cross; but Christ had left him before his passion, and Christ only *seemed to have suffered*".

Irenaeus describes only one clearly Jewish-Christian sect, the Ebionites: they circumcise their sons, follow Jewish customs, use only Matthew's Gospel, reject Paul as an apostate, pray towards Jerusalem, etc. (*A.H.*, 1.26.2). For their christology, he links them with Cerinthus of Asia, who however, unlike them, denied creation to "the First God". But like him they "supposed that Jesus had not been born of a virgin, but he had been the son of Joseph and Mary, conceived like all the rest of mankind, and had been more righteous, prudent and wise. And after his baptism Christ from the supreme Power (αὐθεντίας) descended into him in the form of a dove, and then he proclaimed the unknown Father and performed miracles. But in the end Christ departed from Jesus, and Jesus has suffered (πεπονθέναι) and risen again, but Christ has remained untouched by suffering (ἀπαθῆ), as he was a spiritual being" (1.26.1).

Irenaeus' account is confirmed by an excerpt from the Gospel of the Ebionites, in which the Spirit (rather than "Christ") descends like a dove and enters Jesus, following his Baptism; and the divine voice adds the words, "Today have I begotten you" (Epiphanius, *Panar.*, 30.13.7).

An Ebionite Opposition in Ignatius

The first point which strikes one in Irenaeus' account is how *congenial* the reported Ebionite christology would be to Ignatius' Jewish Christians. It is a *prophetic, possessionist* christology. In the ἀρχεῖα we read of human beings like Elijah or Elisha, on whom the hand of the Lord falls, or who are taken by the Spirit of the Lord; they may then perform superhuman feats, and run before Ahab's chariot from Carmel to Jezreel. According to Epiphanius, Ebionites said that Christ clothed himself with Jesus (ἐνεδύσατο, 30.3.1); scripture uses the same image of Gideon, and Amasai, and Zechariah. When the Word of the Lord comes on a prophet, he may be carried away to the divine council, or to a valley of dry bones, where divine truths are revealed to him; just as Jesus, indwelt for a period by Christ, was able to proclaim the unknown Father and perform miracles. The Ebionite Jesus is in line with the Old Testament prophet, possessed by a divine power for a period.

The period during which Christ possessed Jesus lasted from after his Baptism till before his Passion; and it is noticeable that this is precisely the period *excluded from Ignatius' confessional catalogues:* -

> For our God, Jesus the Christ, was conceived in the womb by Mary according to a dispensation, of the seed of David but also of the Holy Ghost; and he was born and was baptized that by his passion he might cleanse water (E 18.2).
>
> Be ye fully persuaded concerning the birth and passion and resurrection, which took place in the time of the governorship of Pontius Pilate; for these things were truly and certainly done by Jesus Christ our hope (M 11).
>
> Jesus Christ, who was of the race of David, who was the son of Mary, who was truly born and ate and drank, was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate, was truly crucified and died in the sight of those in heaven and those on earth and those under the earth; who moreover was truly raised from the dead, His Father having raised him (T 9).
>
> He is truly of the race of David according to the flesh, but Son of God by the divine will and power, truly born of a virgin and baptized by John that *all righteousness might be fulfilled* by Him, truly nailed up in the flesh for our sakes under Pontius Pilate and Herod the tetrarch . . . that *He might set up an ensign* unto all the ages through his resurrection (S 1.1f.).

Ignatius asserts the reality of (i) Jesus Christ's human paternity back to the line of David; (ii) his birth by the virgin Mary; (iii) his baptism; (iv) his crucifixion/passion under Pilate, (v) his death, and (vi) his resurrection. For the last, he offers proof in the form of physical details taken from Lk. 24. There were plenty of such physical details which would similarly have sealed his case for events in the ministry: say, the woman with flux who touched him, or his breaking bread and eating at the Last Supper. But Ignatius never refers to any event between the baptism and the passion, let alone offers evidence for their reality: when he says Jesus Christ ἐδιώχθη under Pontius Pilate, he is referring to the passion. This would cohere with an opposition which asserted the physical reality of the ministry, the period when Jesus and Christ were united; but at the same time Christ would not be σαρκοφόρος, incarnate.

(i) Ignatius is in the same difficulty as every other early Christian, with the need to assert that Jesus Christ is both of the seed of David and is also Son of God. Paul said he was both in Rom. 1.3f., and the Pastorals keep up the tradition (2 Tim. 2.8), and Matthew and Luke both try forms of the solution that he was adopted into Joseph's family, who were Davidids. The matter remains a mystery to Ignatius, but he wishes to continue the

seed-of-David tradition because it emphasizes Jesus Christ's humanity. The best he can do is to say it was done κατ' οἰκονομίαν (E 18.2).

(ii) The Ebionites denied the virginal conception, asserting that Jesus was the son of Joseph and Mary, conceived in the normal way. Ignatius disputes this repeatedly. In addition to the passages above (E, T, S), we may notice E 7.2: εἷς ἰατρός ἐστιν, σαρκικὸς καὶ πνευματικός, γεννητὸς καὶ ἀγέννητος, ἐν ἀνθρώπῳ Θεός, ἐν θανάτῳ ζωὴ ἀληθινή, καὶ ἐκ Μαρίας καὶ ἐκ Θεοῦ. Jesus Christ was a single physician, to heal the bites of the rabid heretical dogs, both σαρκικός and πνευματικός—unlike the Ebionite view with a split person, a fleshly Jesus possessed by a spiritual Christ. He was γεννητός, born of Mary, but also ἀγέννητος, unborn, from God; *God in man*—not like the Ebionite "saviour" Christ who was unborn and only temporarily taking Jesus over; and not from God at all, but from the highest Power, the senior archon or archangel.

(iii) For the Ebionites, the baptism of Jesus was the crucial moment, at which Christ entered him. Ignatius twice refers to the baptism of Jesus Christ, both times with embarrassment. In E 18.2 "he was baptized ἵνα τῷ πάθει τὸ ὕδωρ καθαρίσῃ"; that does seem a most cumbrous reason for being baptized! In S 1 "he was baptized in order that all righteousness might be fulfilled by him": there was indeed authority for saying that in Matt. 3.15, but the formula is vague and evasive. In this matter we find an increasing defensiveness in our texts. Mark 1.10 has Jesus see the Holy Spirit descending εἰς αὐτόν. Matthew and Luke both amend this to ἐπ' αὐτόν. John omits the Baptism altogether, and merely has the Baptist testify to having seen the Spirit descending and remaining ἐπ' αὐτόν. Ignatius is in line with mainstream Christian tradition in reducing the significance of the Baptism: it was not the great moment when Christ entered Jesus, as the Ebionites maintained—Jesus Christ was a unity from before the Incarnation.

(iv) When Ignatius purports to quote the opposition's doctrine, it is always *the Passion* which is the point at issue. It is his death "which some deny" (M 9.1f.); "But if, as some who are godless, that is faithless, say τὸ δοκεῖν πεπονθέναι αὐτόν . . ." (T 10); "not as some faithless people say τὸ δοκεῖν αὐτὸν πεπονθέναι" (S 2). The passion and death are the second, and more crucial, point of the Ebionite christology. They could agree with any orthodox preacher who said that Christ went about doing good, healing the sick, proclaiming the kingdom, etc.; but should the preacher go on to say that he suffered death upon the cross for our sake, they must beg to

differ—it was Jesus who suffered and died, Christ only seemed to suffer, but he was of course ἀπαθής, for he was a spiritual being. There is a significant echo of Ignatius' opponents in Irenaeus' account of the Cerinthian/Ebionite system. The narrative of Christ's interaction with Jesus is told, as we should expect, in the aorist tense; but with the passion, Irenaeus slips into the perfect—κατελθεῖν . . . κηρῦξαι . . . ἐπιτελέσαι . . . ἀποστῆναι . . . τὸν Ἰησοῦν πεπονθέναι. The perfect, so familiar from disputes with the Ebionites in Ignatius' time, has been carried over into Irenaeus' report.

It is the passion which is the central fact proclaimed in Ignatius' ἀληθῶς catalogues, and it is constantly his central theme. We may return to E 7.2 for a final illustration: "There is one physician, of flesh and of spirit, born and unborn, God in man, ἐν θανάτῳ ζωὴ ἀληθινή, both from Mary and from God, πρῶτον παθητὸς καὶ τότε ἀπαθής, Ἰησοῦς Χριστός. It was *in his death* that Jesus Christ showed himself to be true Life—not, as the Ebionites say, with Jesus dying and Christ bringing divine life. It was not a divided being, as they maintain, a suffering Jesus and a non-suffering Christ. Jesus Christ was a unity throughout, suffering at first, while on the cross, but beyond suffering now he has risen.

(v) It is noticeable that both the Ebionites and Ignatius' opponents draw the line at the Passion, not at *the death* of Jesus; though naturally Ignatius himself wishes to stress that Jesus Christ died, and so wrought our salvation, while the Ebionites denied this, thinking that only Jesus died. The concentration on the suffering rather than the dying is surprising, because it raises questions about hunger, weariness, thirst, etc. which were to cause Christian theologians trouble later; but these are not in view—τὸ πάθος covers what we call the Passion, including the death. Ignatius defines the point at which Jesus Christ became ἀπαθής (E 7.2) and twice denies the opposition's assertion of his πεπονθέναι; and these are just the terms which Irenaeus attributes to the Ebionites in *A.H.*, 1.26.1.

(vi) Irenacus says that the Ebionites supposed *Jesus to have risen again*, Christ having already ascended to heaven. Paul believed that the Jerusalem church thought as he did: that "Christ", i.e. Jesus-Christ, had been raised the third day, and had appeared to Cephas, James and the others (1 Cor. 15.4-7). However Ignatius gives us a rather different impression. In S 3 he writes, "For I know and believe that He was in the flesh even after the resurrection . . . ", and evidence is offered of his being touched, and of his eating and drinking, after rising, taken from Lk. 24. Ignatius clearly thinks that his opponents neither know nor believe this: they think the

post-Easter appearances were non-corporeal. They do not believe that Jesus-Christ "raised himself truly" (S 2.1) at all.

How has this come to pass? It is not at all likely that Ignatius has misunderstood his opponents, because the stress on the physicality of the risen Lord, the stories of touching, eating and drinking, are shared by Luke and John: from the 80s at least some Christians have been denying the physicality of the resurrection, and these stories are the response of the mainstream (Pauline) church. It is much more likely that Ignatius knew perfectly well what he was up against, and it is in line with what Paul says in 1 Cor. 15.

At first Paul and the other apostles could be at one in having "seen the Lord", and he can appeal to this unanimity in 15.1-11. With time, however, theological reflection moves in different directions, and a possessionist christology raises the question, "What then did the apostles see, a physical or a 'spiritual' being?" As it was only seeing that was in the tradition, it was open to the Corinthian opposition to sideline Jesus' resurrection. For them the great thing was that the kingdom of God was here already (4.8,20; cp.15.50); they thought that "there is no resurrection of the dead" (15.12), and the idea that the resurrected come corporeally was absurd (15.35). Perhaps they saw Jesus in the way Luke describes his appearance to Paul, or perhaps it was his "angel" (Acts 12.15), or a vision of Christ. It is this non-bodily resurrected being which is still being defended in Ignatius' time, and it belongs with Ebionite thinking. Jesus rose after his passion, they said (Irenaeus), but not as a united sarcic-pneumatic being. Ignatius' opponents did not hold with a sarcic-pneumatic whole either: their resurrected being was non-corporeal, perhaps the heavenly Christ appearing like Raphael in the book of Tobit.

(vii) We may add a final point. In M 8 Ignatius warns: "Be not seduced by strange doctrines nor antiquated fables which are profitless. For if even to this day we live after the manner of Judaism, we avow that we have not received grace: for the divine prophets . . . were persecuted . . . that they which are disobedient might be fully persuaded that there is one God who manifested himself through Jesus Christ his Son, who is His Word, that proceeded from silence". Ignatius held that Jesus Christ was the Son of the one God, with no intervening power; before God's Word, Jesus Christ, there was silence. His opponents, the disobedient, held a more complex position: there was not just a single God, and there was some intervening being between Him and His Word. Now Irenaeus says that the Ebionites held such a complex theology: "but after [Jesus'] baptism Christ

descended into him from the highest Power (ab ex principitate quae est super omnia/ἀπὸ τῆς ὑπὲρ τὰ ὅλα αὐθεντίας). This "highest power" is carefully distinguished from the "unknown Father". So here also Ignatius' Jewish-Christian "docetists" believe the same doctrine as Irenaeus' Ebionites.[15]

In this way it is possible to make good sense of the Judaizing "docetism" which has been such a puzzle for Ignatian studies. Jewish Christians had from early on adopted a prophetic, or possessionist understanding of Jesus. A heavenly Spirit, or Christ, had entered him at his Baptism and left him before his Passion, enabling him during his ministry to work miracles and reveal divine mysteries. Ignatius never mentions any problem over the period of the ministry. His opponents only parted company with him when he said that Jesus Christ had suffered: for them this was not right—*Jesus* had suffered indeed, but *Christ only seemed to have suffered.* They in fact denied that Christ had been conceived and born of Mary, and had been baptized, and that he rose again; and Ignatius repeatedly asserts that Jesus Christ experienced all these things. But their "docetism" applied only to their assertion that "he seemed to have suffered", and the "he" there was Christ, not Jesus. This interpretation is confirmed by Ignatius' almost unvarying insistence on the double names Jesus-Christ, Christ-Jesus, which excludes the Ebionite division; and by the warnings in T 9, "Be ye deaf, when any man speaketh to you *apart from Christ Jesus*", and Φ 6, "if either one or the other *speak not concerning Jesus Christ*", which give the game away. Even his words about the one God whose Word proceeded from silence (M 8) agree with the Ebionite claim that Christ came not from God but from the highest power.

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[15] It is noticeable that Ignatius does not hint at any division in the godhead over creation, the teaching which Irenaeus ascribes to Cerinthus (*A.H.*, 1.26.1).